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Letter dated 5 March 2009 from the Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council

With reference to the agenda of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council for 2009, I have the honour to request the inclusion of a sub-item entitled "Rehabilitation of the marshes in the southern regions of Iraq" under agenda item 13 (a), entitled "Economic and environmental questions: sustainable development" (see annex).

I have further the honour to request that the present letter and its annex be circulated as a document of the Economic and Social Council.

(*Signed*) T. Hamid **Al Bayati**
Ambassador
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Annex to the letter dated 5 March 2009 from the Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council

The marshlands in Iraq

Importance of Iraqi marshlands

The Iraqi marshlands constitute the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East and western Eurasia. They are a crucial part of intercontinental flyways for migratory birds, support endangered species and sustain freshwater fisheries, as well as the marine ecosystem of the Persian Gulf. In addition to their ecological importance, these marshlands are unique from the global perspective of human heritage. They have been home to indigenous communities for millenniums. The destruction of the Iraqi marshlands and the consequent displacement of its indigenous Marsh Arab population are among the major humanitarian and environmental challenges facing Iraq. The role of the marshlands as a transboundary water resource and the presence of petroleum reserves have placed the future of the marshland region among the priorities for Iraq's reconstruction agenda.

Destruction of marshlands

In the early 1970s, the marshlands, consisting of interconnected lakes, mudflats and wetlands in the lower part of the Tigris-Euphrates basin, extended over 20,000 km^2 of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Subsequent upstream dam construction diminished water flows, eliminated the flood pulses that sustained wetlands in the lower basin and increased pollution concentrations (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2001 and 2003). To be mentioned here are the previous regime's reckless and irresponsible policies and practices, accelerated by the construction of extensive drainage works by 2000, which caused over 90 per cent of the area to dry out as saltpans with severe ecosystem damage. Based on the rapid rate of decline, the marshlands were considered likely to disappear by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

With the collapse of the former regime in mid-2003, local residents opened floodgates and breached embankments to reintroduce water into the marshlands. Satellite images analysed by UNEP in 2003 revealed that some of the formerly dried out areas had been re-inundated, helped by wetter climatic conditions than usual. By April 2004, approximately 20 per cent of the original marshland area was re-inundated, compared with 5 to 7 per cent in 2003. Some donor governments, including the United States of America and Italy, have been developing master plans for the restoration of the marshlands so that reflooding and subsequent marshland restoration can be carried out effectively. The final size of the restored area and its ecological character remain uncertain.

In addition to the ecological damage that severely curtailed the subsistence lifestyle, the residents of the marshlands experienced major displacement in a campaign by the former Iraqi Government in the 1990s. Assessments carried out in 2003 and 2004 reported that between 85,000 and 100,000 Marsh Arabs currently reside within or near the remaining marshlands, with less than 10 per cent leading a traditional subsistence existence. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Marsh Arabs remain displaced internally within Iraq, and approximately 100,000 are thought to

be living as refugees outside Iraq, primarily in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Non-Marsh Arab communities also reside within the marshland region.

The Iraqi marshlands constitute the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East, with environmental and sociocultural significance. Recent assessments of environmental conditions in Iraq, as reported by UNEP and the United Nations/World Bank Needs Assessment Initiative for the Reconstruction of Iraq, have identified the destruction of the Iraqi marshlands as one of the major environmental and humanitarian disasters facing Iraq (United Nations and World Bank, 2003). Critical problems and associated priority needs for the Iraqi marshlands identified by the Iraqi authorities and the United Nations assessments include the following:

Marshland degradation. While the reflooding of dried areas started in 2003, only 20 to 30 per cent of the original area has been re-inundated to date, with varying degrees of ecosystem recovery. Marsh water is contaminated with pesticides, with salt from the dried surface and with untreated industrial discharge and sewage from upstream. Haphazard breaching of embankments has also resulted in stagnant contaminated water in some areas, impacting vegetative and fish recovery. Water quality and marshland management is an urgent priority to protect human health and livelihood and to preserve biodiversity and the ecosystems.

Lack of drinking water. The 2003 United Nations inter-agency assessment and a public health survey by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) found that the provision of safe drinking water is the critical priority for the residents in the Iraqi marshlands (United Nations, 2003). While some residents are able to purchase tanker water, many, particularly those living within the marshes, currently obtain drinking water directly from the marshes without treatment (USAID, 2004).

Lack of sanitation. Assessments found that most settlements lack basic sanitation systems, and wastewater is often drained through open channels to the nearest stream or to the street. The presence of human waste in streets was noted in 50 per cent of villages in the region. Outbreaks of water-borne diseases are prevalent. The provision of wastewater treatment services is therefore a critical necessity for public health. In addition, the return of displaced persons to the marshland area continues to place an increasing burden on the provision of drinking water and sanitation.

The importance and the main beneficiaries of the marshlands restoration project

Marshland communities. Marshland communities have a current total population of 85,000 to 100,000, according to the 2004 census figure (USAID, 2004). With the return of displaced persons, the total population could eventually reach up to half a million people. Of these, the communities that participate in the pilot implementation of water, wastewater, and marshland management have gained access to safe water, adequate sanitation and water quality management practices. In addition, the pilot implementations have identified options and management practices that are suitable for other communities. Community leaders have been recognized as stakeholders, and their inputs and views have been solicited for pilot placements, community-level training and initiative support, and longer-term management planning. The communities have also been an integral part of sustaining the pilot options and have been provided with support for local

initiatives. On-the-job training for local implementation and maintenance teams has also been provided.

Iraqi policymakers. Iraq's Ministry of Environment has hosted the Project Implementation Unit and has received the institutional and capacity support to start addressing the marshland issues in a more integrated manner. Policymakers from line ministries and governorates of southern Iraq have received approximately 120 policy-oriented training placements, as well as study tour opportunities on policy-related aspects of marshland management. In addition, support has been provided to carry out in-country training by trained professionals, multiplying the effects of capacity-building. Equipment and services for the Marshland Information Network nodes within the Project Implementation Unit and the southern governorates have been provided, in addition to training. Equipment for information management, remote sensing and software have also been provided, with necessary training for use and maintenance.

Iraqi technical experts. Technical experts from line ministries, southern governorates and relevant departments of local universities (namely, University of Basrah and University of Thi-Qar) have received approximately 180 placements for technical training, as well as study tour opportunities to evaluate implementation of environmentally sound technologies. Similar to policy-related training, support has been provided to carry out in-country training by trained professionals, multiplying the effects of capacity-building. Upon completion of training, they were expected to utilize their acquired skills in various tasks needed for the implementation of environmentally sound technologies within this project. Specific tasks, such as pilot site identification and maintenance, have been carried out with local contracts and consultants, through the active involvement of the Project Implementation Unit with UNEP support. The project has thus increased the demand for trained Iraqi experts.

Residents of Southern Iraq. The 2003 United Nations assessment found that the Marsh Arabs did not want to be treated separately from surrounding communities, to prevent artificial divides and local conflicts, which could hinder their integration into wider Iraqi society. As such, assistance to the Marsh Arabs and restoration efforts have been integrated within a wider regional development framework for the reconstruction of southern Iraq, which benefits approximately 2.5 million residents of the three governorates (Missan, Basrah, Thi-Qar) in which the Iraqi marshlands are located, through relevant institutions in these governorates. Specifically, training opportunities for governorate officials have been provided, particularly for policy-relevant subjects and assessment procedures. Equipment and training necessary for accessing the Marshland Information Network have also been made available at the governorate level (UNEP, 2001 and 2003).

The Iraqi Government requests the addition of a new agenda item on the restoration of the Iraqi marshlands to the agenda items of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council for 2009, which will be held in Geneva, due to the need to draw the attention of the international community and regional stakeholders to the ongoing projects by the Government, in collaboration with United Nations agencies and friendly countries, to restore the Iraqi marshlands.

The Iraqi Government believes that the issue of the marshlands in Iraq and its solutions and benefits are central to sustainable development issues, and it is necessary to discuss them at the Economic and Social Council. With the increasing challenges the world is facing from climate change, we need to give further attention to environmental matters and their impacts.